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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Transportation for our Alaska tour included flying to Nome and riding rough school buses to the Eskimo camps and villages along the coast of the Bering Sea.

Cold gray haze covered the land and heightened our awareness of how close we were to Siberia. Briefings at the Museum of Natural History in Anchorage had reopened the controversies as to where, when, or even if the Indians and Eskimos ever passed over the Bering Strait.

Asking great grandfathers the questions only deepened the mystery. All they tell white men is that man was hatched from raven eggs. My interest wandered in another direction.

In the discussions, the lecturer told how the affluent tribe, the Tlingits, celebrated by having what they called a "potlatch"; founding, in my opinion, the very core for our modern day Congress. At their festival, the Tlingits gave away their most precious possessions, exactly like our congressmen hand out every coin the tax payers send them.

On the trip farther north from Nome, a plane landed on the roadway. Close at hand helicopter tight-herded a band of reindeer. The driver said the Eskimos were rounding up the reindeer to vaccinate them for brucellosis and give them Ivomec to control warble worms.

From the way he described the life cycle, warble worms are related to the heel flies and grubs in Texas cattle, except these pests are able to exist in colder weather. Down south, a guide told us ice worms live in the glaciers, but be sure to keep the credit straight on that information. I did see a sick caribou, mopping along a draw, that was wormy as some of the calves coming out of the swampland of the lower 48.

Reindeer herding has improved for Eskimos. Japanese buy the antlers to grind into stimulants. Statewide, in the summer, reindeer sausages sell at outlandish prices in the restaurants. Should there be a run on the product, about every pothole and lake from the central region on has a big fat moose gobbling up some sort of algae, or huge grizzly bear sitting on the bank, stuffed in fishes; which, of course, in either case is going to catch the sausage grinder's eye.

Late one afternoon after we'd visited the Eskimo settlement of Teller and bought a few fossilized ivory bracelets for handsome prices, we detoured to a fishing outpost called Camp Wooley. From the shore, to the "spit," or island, the camp looked authentic with a big walrus hide drying on a rack and some lean-to-looking shelters.

Two Eskimo kids pulled a skiff across on a rope like a ferry. The first three Smithsonians to board tried to help

the boys and plunged off into the 30-degree water some 10 feet from the bank. We had enough extra clothes to lend them dry ones. Like boys the world over, these headed for the far shore and took off running. Raised to be skilled sailors, they were surely in a state of shock at seeing three grown white people falling out of a boat. Also, I imagine when their parents discovered they'd halted such a famous troop of souvenir collectors, they were probably threatened by the threat of being fed to the polar bears.

Jostling along on the school bus, the idea of man coming from a raven egg didn't seem so far fetched. Fellow I know down at San Antonio specializes in teaching crows and ravens to talk. As cold and desolate as the scenery was, I wouldn't have minded being back down south with old Arch and his talking birds.